

Hold People Power

WASHINGTON
A few months ago, when the Eastern atmosphere was more euphoric, Vitaly Korotich, editor of the Soviet magazine *Ogonyok*, said that "We the people are the new superpower."

The people of Lithuania are showing it is true in ways he probably didn't have in mind, ways that require restraint because superpower is a heavy responsibility.

There can be no more doubt that Lithuania and the other Baltic States at the least are going to be independent, one way or another. There is a momentum to events, just as there came a time last year when there was no more point to arguing whether or not Germany should be united. It had become inevitable. The question was how and when.

The Baltic states are evidently reaching such a point. It is probable,

Averting violence in Lithuania.

though perhaps not yet quite inevitable, that the Soviet Union is going to break down in fragments, perhaps leaving a core of just the Russian Republic, though that would still be a huge land with some three-quarters of Soviet territory and half its people. There might be some kind of confederation holding more of the empire together, but that is becoming less likely.

How and when this develops matters tremendously because implosion of such a huge, powerful state will affect the whole world. Mikhail Gorbachev's dilemma is grave. He isn't really responsible — no man could create such an earthquake. But he has been the catalyst for unleashing great accumulated pressures.

Of course it is natural for the West to sympathize with the aspirations of the people of Lithuania who have discovered their new power. The right of people to decide for themselves is basic. But it is also necessary to keep in mind what a dramatic difference the how and when of carrying out their decision will make. It is seriously irresponsible to urge them to plunge ahead when we know we are prepared to do little more than weep at their funeral, if it came to that, as we did for Hungarians in 1956 and Czechoslovaks in 1968.

Indeed, they have shown a remarkable sobriety and deliberation in their courage. The wise way to support them is not to egg them on with early,

and impotent, recognition of nationhood but with assurance that the difficult passage ahead will bring them to their goal.

Both Vilnius and Moscow have made clumsy mistakes in the test of wills over the last few months. Mr. Gorbachev should have known that threats would only inflame resistance. But he apparently felt he had to show others in his troubled realm that he could stand up to defiance. It is not easy, as Winston Churchill adamantly proclaimed, to accept the task of presiding over the dissolution of empire. But it is sage and valorous, the highest test of statesmanship, to do it when the time comes.

We can't know whether or not this is Mr. Gorbachev's veiled intention, but it remains in our interest to leave him the opportunity and not to provoke foreclosures. This is a tremendously delicate operation for the Bush Administration. Sometimes saying very little is harder than shouting, as the previous Administration probably would have done.

So far, Washington has performed well. Perhaps the failure to take the measure of repression in China has diminished Administration credibility in the Soviet case. The two situations are totally different. In Beijing, old men clinging to crumbling power that can only be held together by force tried to dam a tide that is going to engulf them sooner or later. In Moscow, an innovator is trying to ride and manage overwhelmingly difficult but irresistible currents.

It might help if Washington were willing to show it sees the difference. The stakes are enormous. There is no way that the elaborately woven strands of improving East-West relations can be kept in hand if Moscow reverts to its traditional use of force. Mr. Gorbachev must know that.

But if he succumbs to the temptation, and no doubt the urging of many in his country, to use the power at his disposal, it is not only his own hopes and plans that would be destroyed in the crash. The changes that he launched have reverberated around the world, undermining tyrants and opening minds everywhere. That must not be allowed to stop. But it will not be advanced by violence or chaos, which all reasonable people must try to avert.

Recently, Mr. Gorbachev told visiting East Europeans that the choice was not between him and more perestroika and glasnost. It was between him and Fascism, he said bluntly. Maybe that too was scare tactics. But the danger of a Russian nationalist-Fascism, or the anarchy that would surely lead to it, as successor to a decomposing Soviet Union, is real. The transition is critical. People power requires thoughtful people, on the sidelines as well as on the scene. □